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The manifestation of personal philosophies concerning material and form

Mark Methner

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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THE MANIFESTATION OF PERSONAL PHILOSOPHIES CONCERNING MATERIAL AND FORM

by

Mark Methner

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APPROVALS

Advisor: Douglas E. Syler

Date: 6/2/82

Associate Advisor: William G. Keyar

Date: 7/9/82

Associate Advisor: John Hoz

Date: 5.20.82

Graduate Academic Council Representative: Fred Meyer

Date: 9/2/82

Dean, College of Fine & Applied Arts: Robert H. Johnston

Date: September 3, 1982

I, Mark Methner, prefer to be contacted each time a request for production is made. I can be reached at the following address.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis will present a set of ideas which have been developed and refined through the expenditure of a great deal of time, energy, and thought. Perhaps a brief initial discussion of the context out of which these ideas have grown and within which they exist will be helpful as a frame of reference.

The attitudes and approaches which will be presented here are a very direct result of my extensive background in the fine arts. When I became involved with wood, it was an involvement which was naturally oriented toward a self expression. Wood was simply another medium or material which was available to me through which I could express my personal ideas and sensitivities. Not only was the level of creative energy and sensitivity in my work with wood the same as that present in my drawing, painting, and sculptural work, but the objective of the work was very similar. This versatility to deal with the same principles in different media was, and remains something which is both very important and enjoyable to me.

The key difference between my work with wood and that in other media had to do with the function of the pieces. At about the same time I began working with wood, I recall being asked the questions of why a work of art must hang on a wall or stand in a gallery and what prevented art from serving a utilitarian function as well as an aesthetic one. I found these to be intriguing questions. They created a challenge for me and I consequently oriented my work with wood in that direction. I hoped to create pieces in which neither the utilitarian function nor the aesthetics of the piece were dominant, but were working harmoniously to make a statement about myself as an artist and a person.

At the point of my initial involvement with wood, I was completely unaware of what was being or had been done with wood in terms of various directions, attitudes, or approaches which had been taken historically, traditionally, or contemporarily. I now believe that this unawareness served a very positive end. It allowed my approach to develop as a very honest and personal one which was naturally suited to my objectives. Becoming aware of others' attitudes and approaches has been an enlightening experience for me. Although I strongly believed in what I was doing without being aware of the similarities or differences of others, I found it very exciting and refreshing to

discover that some shared similar ideas and learned to understand and respect the individual differences of others.

The purpose of this thesis is to present my attitude and approach toward material and form and the manner in which these considerations determine the nature of my work. They will be presented and discussed in Chapter Two and the third chapter will illustrate the way in which these ideas are manifested in and through my work.

CHAPTER I

THE INDIVIDUALITY OF ATTITUDES AND APPROACHES

The individuality of attitude and approach to the materials and the forms with which one works are, I believe, the key factors which determine the nature and uniqueness of an individual's work. Consequently, I believe that the differences between one individual's work and another's are no more or less than the differences between those individuals.

The relationship of an individual to the materials with which he works may or may not be immediately obvious to an observer of his work. Perhaps the work in which this relationship is most obvious is that of the purists, where a strong respect for or even reverence toward the material is evident. This, however, does not necessarily indicate a lack of respect for the material in work which does not have this orientation, for the properties or qualities of a material to which one individual relates most strongly are not necessarily those to which others relate. This relationship to material is a personal one and the properties or qualities of a material which one chooses to deal with in his work are simply a function of his individuality.

The individuality of form is also a very personal relationship and one which is perhaps more easily recognized by an observer. The individual's approach to material may or may not be of significance here. The approach to material of the purist, for instance, largely determines the forms with which he works, for the bond between material and form in his work is essential. Conversely, form may very well be independent of one's approach to material. It is a personal choice, unique to each individual.

These attitudes and approaches to material and form are considerations which, in all their diversity with respect to their individual manifestations, are very important. For both those who are involved in the creative process and those who strive for an understanding and appreciation of it, an awareness and consciousness of these concepts are essential; for these are not only concepts which very directly determine the nature of an individual's work, but are concepts which, I believe, have something to say about purpose.

In an article about George Nakashima in Fine Woodworking magazine, John Kelsey[1] writes:

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[1]John Kelsey is the current editor of Fine Woodworking magazine. He has had formal training in both journalism and woodworking.

> Of the several trends in contemporary design with wood, two are at opposite poles: stacked furniture, where the wood is a beautiful and convenient medium for expressing a sculptural idea, and furniture such as Nakashima's, where the whole point is to let the wood itself dictate the form.[2]

It may be helpful to briefly discuss several individuals' work in order to illustrate these differences of attitude and approach.

Perhaps Kelsey is correct in suggesting that the work of George Nakashima and the stack laminating approach, such as much of the earlier work of Wendell Castle, are at opposite poles.[3]

In George Nakshima's book, The Soul of a Tree, he writes of the Yaku sugis, or Japanese cedars which grow on the island of Yaku. These trees, some of which are said to be over five thousand years old, grow to over forty feet in diameter at the base. Nakashima writes:

> The Yaku sugi is awesome indeed, as every piece of wood is awesome, for it contains the

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[2]John Kelsey, "George Nakashima," Fine Woodworking, January/February 1979, p. 46.

[3]George Nakashima is a very well known and successful woodworker whose formal training was in architecture. His work is very strongly influenced by both cultural and spiritual elements. Wendell Castle is also a widely known and recognized woodworker. Castle has had formal training in both industrial design and sculpture. His initial recognition was a result of his extensive work with stack lamination.

> majesty of all the divine forces that exist on the plane of nature's own objects. The Japanese have a reverence for this tree, for its eternal quality, for the wood itself, for its kharma. . . .
>
> When trees mature, it is fair and moral that they are cut for man's use, as they would soon decay and return to the earth. Trees have a yearning to live again, perhaps to provide the beauty, strength, and utility to serve man, even to become an object of great artistic worth.
>
> Each tree, every part of each tree, has only one perfect use. . . .
>
> Quite often the shape, size, texture and the extravagances of graining dictate the design and function of an object. Here the relationship of man to timber prevails. . .[4]

As Nakashima states, his approach is one in which he is constantly striving to find the one and only perfect use for each individual piece of wood. This approach is one that produces work in which the individuality of the materials is not only a very important consideration, but one which largely determines the forms and functions of the pieces. This is the way of the purist.

In contrast, the stack-laminated work of Wendell Castle illustrates, as Kelsey suggests, an approach which uses wood as simply "a beautiful and convenient medium for expressing a sculptural idea." Here the expression of this sculptural idea is the primary objective and the material is simply a means through which to achieve that end. With

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[4]George Nakashima, The Soul of a Tree (New York: Kodansha International Ltd., 1981), pp. 84-128.

this approach, the forms and functions of the pieces are determined independently of the individuality of the materials and are subject only to the ambitions and desires of the designer.

An approach which is somewhere between these two poles is that exemplified by the work of James Krenov.[5] His approach is perhaps more closely related to that of the purist, but with a bit more freedom, with respect to a personal expression of form, than the approach of George Nakashima. Krenov strives for "a more personalized workmanship with an intimate relationship to materials,"[6] and suggests that "part of a craftsman's purpose in life should be to establish a living relationship with his material and its innate qualities."[7] Krenov writes:

> I stand at my workbench. Shavings curl from the plane in my hands, swish-and-slide, as I rock to the motion of work. The smell of fresh-cut wood, a slick, silvery yellow surface gleaming under the tireless plane, and a feeling of contentment. Nothing is wrong. Here am I, here is my work--and someone is waiting for the fruits of these fleeting hours. My contentment is bound by the whitewashed walls of my little cellar shop, by the stacks of long-sought

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[5]James Krenov is a widely recognized master craftsman who is perhaps best known for his writings and teachings.

[6]James Krenov, The Impractical Cabinetmaker (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1979), p. 61.

[7]Ibid., p. 13.

> woods with their mild colors and elusive smells, by the planked ceiling through which I hear the quick footsteps of a child--and yet it is boundless, my joy. The cabinet is taking shape. Someone is waiting for it. With a bit of luck, it will be liked, given continuity in a life of its own. Hands will caress this shimmery surface, a thumb will discover the edge which I am rounding. An edge rounded with my plane. An edge cut rounded, but not sandpapered--a sensitive finger will understand its living imperfections and be pleased at the traces left by sharp steel on hardwood. Through the years this edge will be polished, change tone, gleam in mellowness. Yet always it will bear the marks of my favorite tool.[8]

As one can sense here, and as Craig McArt[9] suggests in the foreword of Krenov's latest book, his message is a simple and poetic one. His is a way that "places prime importance on an intuitive feel for what is right," and "stresses attitudes of curiosity and virtues of integrity," but above all, makes the promise that " the pleasure is in the doing."[10]

What is most important to remember here is that these are all the ways of individuals, individuals having personal ideas, philosophies, and objectives. One way is no more or

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[8]James Krenov, A Cabinetmaker's Notebook (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1976), p. 32.

[9]Craig McArt is currently a professor of industrial design at Rochester Institute of Technology. He has had formal training in both industrial design and woodworking.

[10]James Krenov, James Krenov, Worker in Wood (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1981), p. 9.

less valid than any other; no better, no worse, simply different.

CHAPTER II

PERSONAL PHILOSOPHIES

As suggested in the previous chapter, attitudes and approaches toward material and form are as diverse as the individuals who are involved with the process of creating. This chapter will present my individual approach; an approach which is no more or less valid than any other, but none the less, the way which seems most appropriate for me.

I have always been intrigued by the tremendous variety of materials we are surrounded by and the uniqueness of each in its own way. This uniqueness is perhaps what I found most interesting: the fact that each material, as a result of its own physical properties, was uniquely and naturally suited to a particular application. With the great diversity of materials available, I saw no reason why any material should ever be used in an application other than that to which it was most naturally suited. I did not and still do not understand why many of the things I see around me are made from materials which are simply inappropriate for the situations to which they are being applied.

These observations and realizations concerning materials and their use have had a profound effect upon my work, specifically upon the materials I use and the way in which I work with them. I see the great variety of natural materials with which this world has been bestowed as a wonderfully beautiful gift; a gift which is perhaps often overlooked by many, but one which cannot be overlooked by those whose fulfillment in life is dependent upon the act of creating. I feel that the misuse of these materials which we have been given is a sacrilege, and consequently my work is very directly and respectfully involved with the nature of the materials with which I work.

Possibly the richest of these natural materials which this world has to offer is wood, with its infinite variety in color, figure, texture, hardness, softness, resilience, suppleness, and brittleness. The beauty of this material lies in its tremendous diversity and in the fact that each individual who works with wood can deal with these qualities in his own very personal way.

I relate very strongly to the physical beauty of wood in its nuances of color, figure, and texture. My love of these has driven me to not only try to preserve these inherent qualities of the material in my work, but to make them an essential and indispensible part of the pieces I create.

In addition to its physical properties, I feel that wood has an intrinsic quality which I refer to as the integrity of the material. This quality is more than a sum of the material's physical properties. It has to do with the emotive quality of wood. I believe that both James Krenov and George Nakashima refer to a similar quality in their writings. Krenov writes about the elusive, mystical quality of wood, and Nakashima writes of what he believes to be the "soul" of the tree. This quality, by whatever terms it may be referred, is a very subtle yet powerful quality. It may be overlooked or go simply unnoticed by many, but its recognition demands a respect for and sensitivity toward the material.

In much the same way that different individuals deal very differently with materials, I believe that the forms with which one works are a very direct function of one's individuality. I find the forms with which I work to be very strongly influenced by my values, principles, and ideology.

Several of the qualities which I value very highly in my life and which I feel have a very direct relationship to my work are simplicity, sensitivity, and consistency. These to me are the essence and beauty of life itself.

Simplicity is perhaps the ultimate beauty. The simplicity which I strive for in my life as well as in my work,

specifically in the forms with which I work, is not an avoidance of complexity or a reduction to crudeness. It is a very refined simplicity, a purity, a simplicity of elegance and grace.

The sensitivity which I strive for is an attention to and appreciation of the smallest and most intimate. It is an awareness and a discriminating consideration of subtlety.

Consistency is more than a quality to me. It is a means, the means by which my life is ordered and through which I am best able to express myself. It is an honest and uncompromising way.

This connection between the motivating forces of my life and those in my work is of ultimate importance to me. It is my raison d'être. The sole objective of my work is to communicate to others these things which I find most beautiful in life, for I believe that beauty is the finest and most delightful part of our world.

I feel that these principles are well exemplified by the nature of the forms with which I work. Although the scale and function of various pieces may be very different, I feel that the forms themselves are very similar in nature. They are very simple, direct forms, with much sensitivity devoted to line, shape, and proportion. They are forms which exemplify a consistent and uncompromising attention to subtlety and detail, for these are forms which seem to

call for very soft, subtle, yet tactile edges; edges which are well defined, unambiguous, yet pleasant to the touch. They tend to possess a degree of formality and exude a presence which is peaceful but strong.

This notion of presence is an element of my work which is largely dependent upon the relationship of material to form, a relationship which is a very essential part of my work. The way in which this relationship affects the presence of a piece is basically a function of what I referred to earlier as the emotive quality of wood, or the quality of the material to possess a particular mood or feeling. It is the combination of this emotive quality and the nature of the form which the material embodies that is responsible for the presence of a given piece.

I try to create pieces in which the relationship of the specific material being used to the specific form in which it is used is such a strong relationship that the piece simply could not exist with the same presence if it were executed in a different material. This is not to say that the piece would simply be different in a different material. I believe that materials which are very similar in nature are capable of producing very similar results, but suggest that the character or presence of the pieces I create would be significantly altered by using materials which were very different in nature than those chosen for the pieces. This

material-form bond to which I am referring is one which is very broad in scope. It is a relationship which is in constant consideration from the very inception of an idea for a piece through the completion of the piece.

Although my method of working most often necessitates my finding or acquiring the material for a piece after the idea is well developed, there is from the very beginning a strong idea of the kind of wood a particular piece will require. I find that certain forms demand certain woods, and the choosing process is always one which relates the combination of "this wood" with "this idea" and the possibilities of that combination.

Inherent within this choosing process are my approach to and attitude toward material, my love of and respect for the uniqueness of different materials, and the need I feel to work with these unique qualities in a manner which evidences an awareness of and respect for their individuality. This process is a means which allows the uniqueness or genuine nature of the individual material to be manifest as an essential and indispensible part of the finished piece.

The result is hopefully a piece in which the material and the form enjoy a symbiotic existence, an existence which is mutually advantageous. This coexistence is one which allows the material to enhance the form while the form in turn enhances the material, creating a sense of balance

and harmony while working in concert toward the same end; namely, to speak softly about the beauty of simplicity and sensitivity.

CHAPTER III

THE MANIFESTATION OF PERSONAL PHILOSOPHIES

Coffee and End Table Set

These pieces exemplify a very strong relationship of material to form. Simplicity is the key to this relationship, for the simple and straightforward nature of the forms maximize the importance of the unique qualities of the material. When forms are reduced to such simple terms, careful and uncompromising attention to subtleties of proportion and the relationship of parts is crucial, as is the relationship of these to the way in which the material is used.

The idea for these tables was generated by the realization of the all too familiar relationship of table legs to an overhanging table top. This realization motivated me to design a table in which the legs were a very important part of the design. Consequently, the key considerations became the size, shape, and proportion of the legs in relationship to the table top and the interaction of the two where they met.

Many of the subtleties in these tables may not be immediately obvious to the observer. Although the observer

may often be unaware of these subtleties, I believe that he is aware of a harmony in the pieces, a harmony which would not exist in their absence. Rather than being details which are obvious or focused upon, these subtle details serve the purpose of preventing a discord or conflict between pieces or parts and yield a consistency and coherence within and throughout the pieces. This consistency allows the observer to experience the pieces without interuption in a very fluid way. He is able to observe them in their totality without being caught up in overstated, blatant, or incoherent details which have nothing to do with the pieces but have only to do with themselves.

Perhaps proportion and balance are the most obvious and easily understood of these subtleties. Conversely, I feel that subtle relationships between parts and the way in which the material works with the form often go unnoticed.

The wood used for these tables is wenge. In its usual flat sawn form, the face grain of this wood can be quite wild, a quality which is not particularly attractive to me. However, in its quartersawn form it has an unusually uniform, straight, and linear grain pattern with a very rich, reserved character. This is a quality which I find quite attractive and was particularly well suited to these tables.

As stated earlier, the legs are essential elements in these tables, and the way in which the wood was used in these legs is particularly significant. Initially, in order to maintain a visual consistency from all points around the tables, it was necessary to cut the stock for the legs in a way which allowed all sides of the legs to have a quarter-sawn or straight grain appearance. It is only possible to achieve this by paying strict attention to the annual rings of the wood while cutting, for they must run at forty-five degree angles to all sides of the cut pieces. When this was accomplished, the outside tapers of the legs were cut. This operation, also in order to maintain consistency, was likewise completely dependent upon the grain pattern. I chose to orient the wood in the legs so that when the tapers were cut and the rounding of the corners was completed, a small amount of face grain would be revealed on those corners. Aware of the grain pattern which would emerge, I knew that this choice would accentuate the tapering of the legs and add a bit of life and vitality to the corners of the tables, thus making the legs a very vital part of them. I should point out that by simply rotating the legs ninety degrees and thus reorienting the annual rings before cutting the tapers, a uniformly striaght grained pattern could have been obtained on these corners.

The tops of these tables also exemplify the working together of the material and the form toward the same end. The form simply presents the material in an unobtrusive and natural way, with soft, friendly, yet well defined edges, and the material functions beautifully and naturally as a flat, smooth surface, able to show off its unique, linear grain in this quartersawn form.

In addition to being very sensitive to the way in which the material and form work together, it is very important to be sensitive to the subtle relationship of parts in a piece. As mentioned previously, this sensitivity serves the purpose of preventing a discord or conflict between those parts. Such is the relationship of the legs to the aprons and stretchers of these tables. The outside surfaces of these members are angled to the same degree as the taper of the legs. Although this corresponding angle is a very subtle detail, one of which the observer may very well be unaware, I believe that its absence would create a conflicting and inconsistent situation where these members meet the legs. This, I feel, would not only be obvious to the observer, but would be detrimental to the feeling of harmony which now exists.

The uncompromising consistency exercised here and the careful, sensitive consideration of the material, form, proportions, and details are all woven into these pieces as

an integral and inseparable part of them. Hopefully they say something about simplicity and the natural beauty of a material when used with sensitivity and respect.

Set of Stools

This trilogy is largely a consequence of my interest in the symbolism associated with the number three. This interest motivated me to do a group of three pieces which were very directly related to each other, each a separate entity having its own unity, but together forming a larger unit or whole. I wanted these pieces to be an expression of the notions of trinity and unity, and consequently dealt with the number three, the triangle, the circle, and combinations of these as symbols of those notions.

In designing these pieces I strove for a sense of delicacy and elegance with a strong feeling of simplicity. The pieces are very carefully and sensitively proportioned, both individually and in relationship to one another. The direct relationship of the individual pieces to each other is accomplished largely by a consistency in size of their parts and the placement of those parts. The size and shape of the seats as well as the position of the three through wedged tenons in each seat are the same. Although the length of the legs differ from piece to piece, the diameters of the legs where they meet with the seats and touch the floor are the same. Likewise, the triangles which are defined by the center points of where the legs touch the floor and where they penetrate the seats are equal. The stretchers occur in a progression in which the uppermost

stretcher of the lower stool is at the same level as the lowest stretcher of the next higher stool. The individuality of each piece is simply a function of the height, the tapering of the legs, and the placement of the stretchers.

The material to form relationship in the seats of these pieces is, I feel, a particularly fine one. The hard, cool feel of bubinga works very nicely for these seats. This wood polishes to a beautiful, smooth surface and will hold a nicely shaped edge, such as the undulating line which flows around the perimeters of the seats. The uniformity of this quartersawn bubinga works nicely with the uniformity of the seats' geometrical, half-circular, half-triangular shape; and perhaps most importantly, used here, in this way, the wood itself is able to show off best its beautiful, block-mottle figuring.

Jewelry Box

I feel that this piece has a very strong sense of presence, a sense which is very directly related to both the material used and its form. The form itself is very simple. It has a strong feeling of formality with its finely contoured surfaces, well defined edges, and meaningful lines. The Bolivian rosewood, with its deep, subdued color, fine texture, and weight also has a feeling of formality. The color contrast and figure in the quartersawn grain pattern gives the form a continuity and life. Together, the material and the form, in their similarity and congruity, create a very rich, refined feeling with a quiet but strong presence.

The interior of this piece is a very intimate space. It is a clean, pristine space with a sense of light and a jewel-like quality. The wood used for the tray and liner is quartersawn maple, a very fine, clean, light wood. The overall pattern of tiny, prismatic flecks, which is the nature of this wood in its quartersawn form, works beautifully with the intricacy and jewel-like quality of this space. The lambskin, with its extremely fine texture, relates to both the pinkish tones in the rosewood and the lightness and cleanness of the maple. With care, sensitivity, and the use of all these inherently beautiful materials, I have tried to create a lush and inviting home for fine

jewelry, and provide a noble and deserving form for these fine materials.

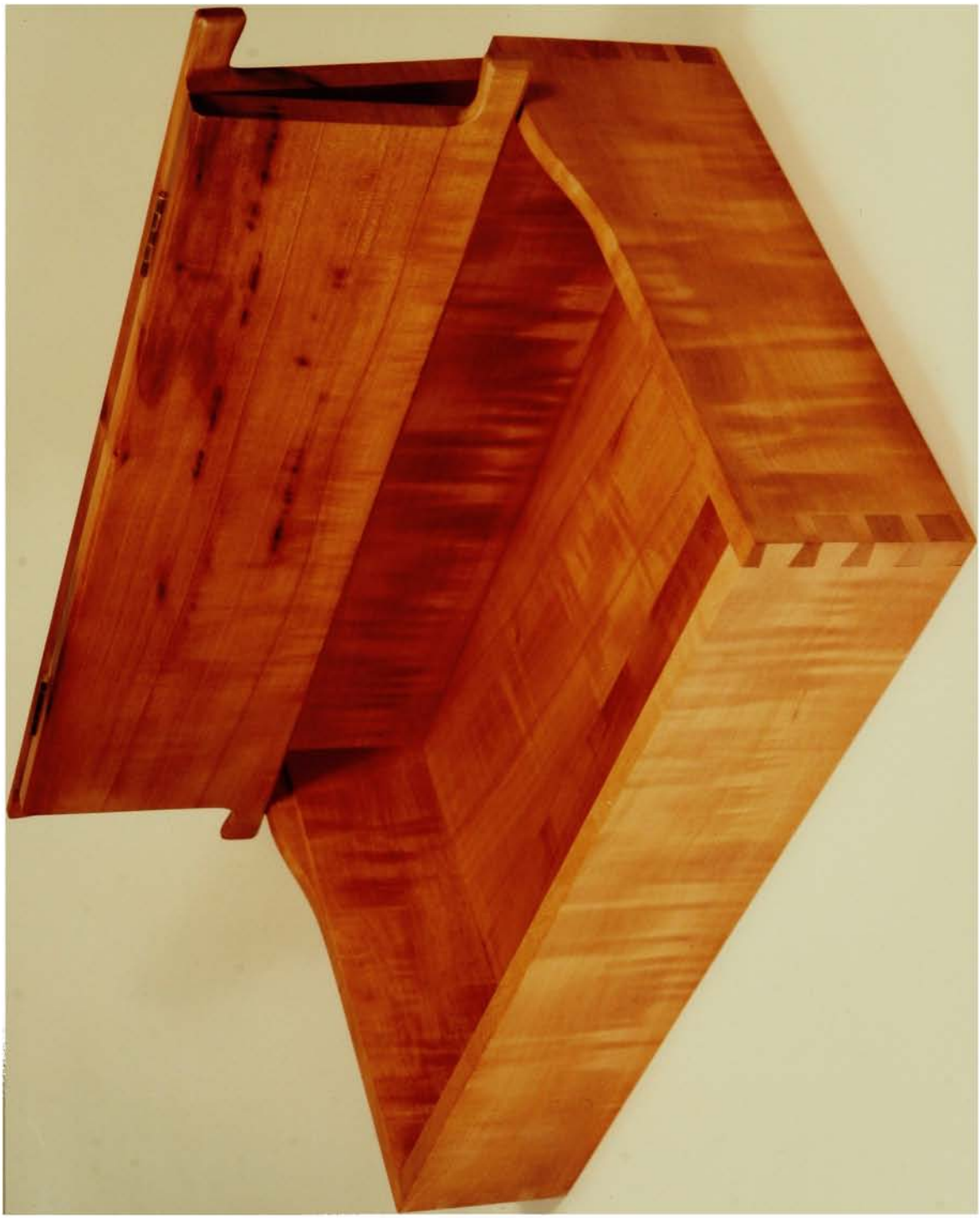
Box with Folding Lid

The simplicity of this piece demanded a wood with a very fine texture and a strong but subtle character and warmth. It had to be a wood that could hold a finely shaped edge because of the lines and subtle details of the piece. I found the Swiss pear to be an excellent choice.

The subtlety of color and shadings in this wood can create a rich play when dealt with sensitively, such as in the bookmatching of the lid. Here a symmetry is created, not a perfect symmetry, but a symmetry which is alive.

The simplicity and purity of this piece seemed to call for dovetailing on its corners; dovetailing for its function and to show the nature of this fine wood to be worked cleanly and accurately. These dovetails were very sensitively proportioned and placed, the objective being to neutralize these corners by maintaining a sense of balance on both sides of the joint, thus preventing them from becoming the dominant element of the piece and allowing the wood itself to speak.

This piece may very well be about purity more than anything else, purity and simplicity of form and purity in the use of material; but hopefully, it also has something to say about intimacy, the intimacy between a sensitive individual, the material he works with, and the things he creates.



CONCLUSION

I find it very difficult to speculate about where this philosophy will lead me in the future, for I do not view these ideas as absolutisms. They are, as has been indicated, ideas which are very directly related to my life: an existence within which I am aware of constant growth and change. Consequently, I believe that these ideas are likewise subject to growth and change.

At this point in my life I feel very strongly and positively about the ideas and work which have been presented here. I feel a degree of success in terms of the ability of this approach and the resulting work to express some of the ideas which I feel are now important for me to express. Perhaps most importantly though, I truly enjoy working this way.

John Ruskin, the great eighteenth century English writer and art critic, addressed the concept of pleasure in labor in his writings. In The Nature and Art of Workmanship, David Pye[1] discusses and critiques some of Ruskin's

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[1]David Pye is a former Professor of Furniture Design at the Royal College of Art in London. He is perhaps most well known as a theorist through his writings.

theories. He says of Ruskin: "His deep belief in the serious importance of art and the sensitivity of his perception must have opened many eyes as they once did mine. Ideas born in his mind have had an immense influence. . ."[2]

Pye quotes Ruskin's contemporary William Morris, a well known eighteenth century artist and poet, from a preface to "On the Nature of Gothic," a chapter of Ruskin's Stones of Venice which was later published as a separate book. Morris states:

> . . . To my mind, and I believe to some others, it is one of the most important things written by the author, and in future days will be considered as one of of the very few necessary and inevitable utterances of the century. To some of us when we first read it, . . . it seemed to point out a new road on which the world should travel. And . . . we can still see no other way out of the folley and degradation of civilization. For the lesson that Ruskin here teaches us is that art is the expression of man's pleasure in labour . . .[3]

My work is a principal source of fulfillment and joy for me. Perhaps this "pleasure in labour" can and will be sensed and appreciated by others. It is my belief that it can and my hope that it will.

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[2]David Pye, The Nature and Art of Workmanship (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 49.

[3]Ibid., p. 48.

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